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ABSTRACT

This paper suggests that educational resources and opportunities currently in operation in rural Australia are brought forward during times of crisis. The paper discusses five aspects of education in rural Australia that are a response to the perceived sense of crisis and that have improved the general and comparative quality of rural education, including: (1) the increased potential for curriculum innovation, seen in such approaches as alternative scheduling and use of local resources; (2) the level of cross system cooperation by which schools share staff and technology to produce positive response from parents and students; (3) the administrative demands of the New South Wales Reform Act in such areas as technology and foreign language, which have been met through shared resources and distance education; (4) the positive outcomes from community closeness, which promotes social capital and the informal curriculum; and (5) the increased potential for school business enterprises with uniquely rural industries such as cultivation, tree propagation, animal husbandry, mussel farming, and aquaculture. (KS)

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CREATIVITY

IN

CRISIS

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Creativity in Crisis

There is an old Chinese curse:

May you live in interesting times.

We are certainly living in interesting times - the word 'crisis' is not an overstatement. As Nola Lippert said in her recent report "Rural Australia is Hurting":

> *Australia is in the grip of a rural recession, some would say depression, comparable to that of the 1890's.*

She went on to tell how:

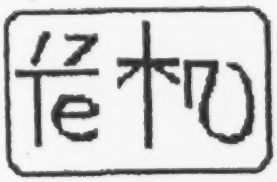
> *the combination of a slump in farm commodity prices, high interest rates which approached 28% when bank charges were taken into account and a crippling drought over much of the continent have placed enormous stresses on the financial, social, physical and emotional resources of many rural families and their communities.*

and

> *while considerable media attention has been directed to the economic aspects of the recession, very little if any attention has been given to the personal and social carnage of this economic phenomenon.*

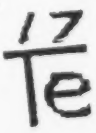
Looking at this issue and its impact on the human psyche, I believe we need to examine this 'interesting time' from the viewpoint that crisis elicits a challenge and that in times of crisis we need to 'drink deeply from our own wells" (as the South American writer Gustavo Gutserrez put it).

The word for crisis is:



(Pronounced Naygaye)

There is wisdom in the construction of their word. Interestingly it made up of two words, two calligraphy characters, which together mean crisis.



(Pronounced Nay)

means danger on the one hand and

(Pronounced Gaye)

opportunity on the other. The challenge therefore is to look for any opportunity and good that presents, and not be paralysed by the dangers or drawn into self fulfilling pessimism. We need to keep clearly in our minds that the greatest gift we have is ourselves with all our enormous capabilities for meeting any challenge. We need to be people of faith (in the broadest sense).

One of the most obvious tensions in the early years of what was the DCAP was that between extending the vision of students by taking them out of their environment (excursions) and deepening the appreciation of students of their existing resources, ie geographical, historical and human. It was a contention issue and one in which the SAG (State Advisory Group) in NSW challenged the transposition model.

It was quite fascinating and not altogether surprising that the longer one was associated with a particular country region the more one became aware of its riches. I was Deputy Chairperson of the North West NSW Management Committee and I can still recall first hand experience at pleasure at:

- the Aborigines who recalled their tongue and their traditions
- the lure of opals at Lightning Ridge
- the serenity of some of the places Lawson wrote from and about
- the hazards of Thomas Mitchell's early journeys
- the area that was apparently the model for some of Colleen McCullough's descriptions in 'Thorn Birds'
- fascinating hot mineral springs
- the grandeur of the Warrumbungles
- the irony of some of Wolsley's failed inventions.

It would not be difficult to go on however I think the point is made. Once existing resources are acknowledged and treasured then there exists a barrier to excesses in a sense of negative concept. One becomes more aware of the value of interpersonal relationships, social capital, environmental uniqueness, a sense of place in time, the potential for innovation and the achievement of contemporaries.

This same type of thinking can be transferred to an examination of the inherent quality of educational resources and opportunities currently in operation in rural Australia AND WHICH ARE BROUGHT TO THE FORE IN TIMES OF CRISIS. It is my contention that rural schools are producing (or have the capacity to produce), a number of educational and sound outcomes at a surprisingly sophisticated (and non published) level and that we should be promulgating such achievements. By researching, and 'talking up' such venturesome feats it is my belief that we can add social capital to the informal curriculum, encourage confidence and consequently bolster achievement.

The one area I would wish to avoid is a 'rural school' versus 'urban schools' debate. What I would like to highlight however is that rural schools have unique strengths which tend to be downplayed by players in the education game. These positive attributes I would argue are being increasingly critical to what is perceived as being a sound education. It is my belief that school communities in times of economic crisis should gain solace and inspiration from the hope prevalent in the education systems. The key factor is QUALITY defined in this paper as:

a. sensitivity to the client

b. knowledge associated with student background.

c. community support

d. responsiveness to need

e. awareness of curriculum development

f. willingness to engage in on-site action research.

I will focus on five aspects of education in rural Australia that are, to some degree or other, a response to a perceived sense of crisis and which have improved the general and comparative quality of rural education. The five such aspects I would wish to focus upon are:

1. the increased potential for curriculum innovation

2. the level of cross system co-operation

3. the benefits of distance education as a stimulating learning mode

4. the positive outcomes from community 'closeness'

5. the increased potential for school-business enterprises.

As this is a workshop and not a lecturette, I will be asking participants to cite and bring along examples (research based or not) of rural education doing it differently and effectively.

THE 'AWAY FROM THE CENTRE' CRISIS

The increased potential for curriculum innovation

It has been my experience as curriculum consultant in Western NSW that there has been a pervading attitude amongst rural schools that 'we are out of the mainstream' and missing out on all the exciting things happening in urban education. To compensate for these perceived shortcomings, and perhaps to supplement social lives, teachers in rural centres value their professional development and seem to absorb with relish the key lessons associated with inservice. Because of this and a range of other factors including:

a. the professional drive of principals and the trust of the community

b. the composition of staff

c. equity funding, DSP, CAP

d. the 'freedom' of distance

there is an improved potential for implementation strategies associated with curriculum developments. In my experience the most cohesive staff situations and the most professionally aware staffs are rural ones.

I am not alone in those views having bounced this belief off a number of colleagues. It was interesting to note recently too that Ray Cavenagh, the colourful Deputy President of the NSW Teachers' Federation, had similar conclusions. He reflected in the midst of an interview regarding this achievements that:

> "I was elected to the NSW Education Commission. It wasn't a great success. I don't think the Department or the Government were really committed to a lot of our conclusions. An area where it did have an impact, I think, was rural education".
>
> (New Perspectives Vol 3 No 4 1991)

I was interested to talk with Dr David Laird of the University of New England about his paper presented at the Australian Curriculum Studies Association National Conference in Adelaide last year. David was presenting a paper on vertical semester organization (VSO) in the secondary curriculum. What amazed him in the early stages of his research was that experimentation in alternative length courses and vertical grouping of students dated back to 1976. He also noted:

> "further analysis also revealed that it was the small secondary schools such as Central schools who were the most frequent users of VSO principles."
>
> (Marshall et al 1988)

Both Cavenagh and Laird both acknowledged the role of Equity programs in the 70s and 80s. Cavenagh specifically went on to say that:

> "... we were more aware of the problems for country kids. I believe that the system (NSW Department) and the people who it employs really have the responsibility to continue to explore those things which work".

I am cognizant in the rural schools for which I have responsibility of quite radical approaches to 'crisis' and equity concerns.

1. School Board making serious allowance for financial deprivation to ensure equitable access.

2. experiments in incorporating upper, primary classes in secondary type time-tabling

3. having occasional P&F functions on Aboriginal settlements

4. action research projects on 'learning styles' to allow for equity considerations

5. research projects on the performance/attitude of rural school products in terms of HSC performance

6. shared educational resources as monies tighten eg, field days, excursions

7. utilization of 'local' resources instead of reliance on external experts

8. fostering of cluster initiatives which obviate a reliance on the 'centre'.

9. dramatic use of the benefits of peer tutoring.

I know there are more. What I also know is that the list of rural initiatives has not been systematically chronicled and fed back to the rural sector. Their response to crisis and equity concerns has exhibited the typical attributes of our rich rural history in terms of:

- courage
- tenacity
- adventure

Crisis of School Numbers and Related Curriculum Offerings

The Level of Cross System Co-operation

The experience of CAP, unique legislative demands in NSW and the quality of relationships have led to some quite innovative arrangements in school communities.

One of the more interesting responses to size constraints involves a co-operative arrangement at Harden/Murrumburrah. Murrumburrah High School, situated in Harden, is the smallest high school in NSW and Trinity Central School Harden with the smallest secondary school component in NSW Catholic education circles decided to embark on what they called a 'Joint Venture'.

The aims of the venture have been to:

1. engage in limited staff sharing arrangements
2. provide access for all students to available technological resources
3. recognize, understand respect foster and preservice the distinctive differences that characterize each school
4. foster a better understanding within the wider community of the advantages brought to it by the harmonizing of school that sing different tunes.

Organizationally the schools share teaching resources in technics, music, art, computer studies and maths. The maths is interesting in that it allows the schools to offer three levels of maths instead of two.

A cross system evaluation committee attempted in both 1990 and 1991 to ascertain the level of success or otherwise of the project. Some of their more interesting findings were:

* 1990 - 99% of parents felt neither school had lost its unique identity.
* With reference to the question "I enjoyed participating in the joint venture", 67% 1991 group of students responded positively compared with 65% in 1990.
* In response to the question "I enjoyed the opportunity to mix with students from the other school", 76% of the students responded positively in the two years the survey has taken place.
* 68% of 1991 students responded positively to "this project has improved my educational opportunities" while 69% responded that way in 1990.

* In 1991 95% of parents wish to see the Joint Venture project maintained or extended in 1992.

* Not surprisingly there were a number of comments by parents along the theme "anything that brings the community together is a must", although there were also two comments regarding the inefficiency of two separate systems. I am naturally reluctant to buy into that argument at this forum.

There will be pressure to include languages on the agenda for discussion at Harden/Murrumburrah Planning Committee in the light of recent legislative requirements.

It was suggested to me in November last year that another of our regional rural Communities has already begun negotiations on a similar arrangement. The obvious benefits of such co-operation include:

- economic rationalism
- community cohesiveness
- awareness of 'resource' potential
- greater opportunities for specialisation

Crisis of Legislation

The Administrative Demands of the NSW Reform Act

The Metherell sponsored Education Reform Act 1990 outlined key learning areas in primary and secondary schools. Of particular interest to educational administrators in NSW rural areas was the eight KLAs for secondary schools. The included:

- English
- Mathematics
- Science
- Human Society and its Environment
- Languages other than English
- Technological and Applied Studies
- Creative Arts
- Personal Development, Health and Physical Education

What was significant was that this detail was outlined in legislation and consequently provided a limiting framework for subsequent negotiation.

It was not difficult to see the genesis of this reform had to do with what Simpson in "Blocked at the Entrance" called a utilitarian view of education where the education system was being restructured to ensure a more competitive economy. From an administrative view point what really stood out were the resource implications of the technological and applied studies and the provision of LOTE.

The LOTE challenge is one that will test my 'creativity in crisis' philosophy.

The most obvious responses to the provision of a compulsory language other than English are:

a. shared resources (cluster or town based), or

b. distance education modes

   i. correspondence

   ii. integrated package.

The Commonwealth Schools Commission Report "Schooling in Rural Australia" had made mention of what they termed "special teaching arrangements" in late 1987.

> *A number of small rural schools are using special teaching arrangements, involving communication technologies, to extend their curriculum offerings. The 'Mallee Cluster' of Ouyen High School and four other high schools in the north-west of Victoria (see Panel 1) illustrates one way to broaden curriculum offerings in small schools. There is a number of schools in which similar arrangements are now well established (e.g. in Oatlands, Tasmania, and in some area schools in South Australia). In Western Australia 'mixed mode' teaching, involving supervision by a teacher of students taking correspondence school lessons while at school, operates in rural schools to provide study opportunities at the Year 11 and 12 levels.*

We have already toyed with the concept of a parent school linking up with a rural school to teach Indonesian. This telematic mode has worked well although there are limitations on numbers and, certain tensions in the host school regarding priority and resourcing. Not surprisingly the Indonesian teacher has a genuinely deep commitment to her rural students and these students seem to be performing comparatively better than the Canberra based counterparts. It would seem that much of this has to do with teacher interest, student quality in the rural school, novelty factor, class size and resource support. The Indonesian teacher, in an evaluation of the project said:

> *The group of St Mary's students involved in this program is a small, selected, highly-motivated and intelligent one. Because the students do not see me, they have to develop a better listening skill, and therefore sense very quickly from the tone of my voice whether I am pleased or not. Through this exercise they acquired very good pronunciation.*
>
> *Involving students of ..... in Distance Education at times, makes learning Indonesian a real challenge for both sides. These interactive, communicative activities is student centred, they want to write, to talk/ask, to "show off".*
>
> *To "Humanise" this high tech system I have visited West Wyalong twice and the students with their parents, visited Canberra and attended the Charity Bazaar held at the Indonesian Embassy. They experienced a quick introduction to Indonesian food, dance and community. Apart from that, my family had the pleasure to host 4 of the students, and we, the guests and my family had an interesting and enjoyable weekend.*
>
> *By having many visitors, teachers, native speakers etc. talk to the students, their motivation to learn Indonesian increased.*
>
> *By taking part in this high tech system, students gained computer skills .*
>
> *The students, maybe because they are a small group and very motivated, have achieved more than my year 8 students at ..... . I think the project is quite successful.*

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After teaching Telematic for about a year I must admit that, actually there is not very much of a difference between the traditional face-to-face teaching and teaching by telematic delivery, as a matter of fact, it improves my preparation and my approach to teaching, it increases my understanding of the current technologies.

With seven Central schools, the Archdiocese is in the process of extending the model to include central schools at Tumut, Cootamundra, Young, Cooma and Temora. The technology is in place for three of these schools. We look like advertising for a language teacher in the next three months and we expect the project to take wings. The difference in mode and the response to perceived need will ensure its success. The legislative crisis will generate an essential and innovative response.

Crisis of 'Familiarity Breeding Contempt'

The Positive Outcomes from Community Closeness

Eugene Clark and William Ramsey of the University of Hobart have been doing some conceptual work on what they term 'social capital'. This pair define:

> "human capital (as) the skills and abilities which a person possesses, and
>
> social capital (as) the network of relations surrounding a person.

They state that social capital is an increasingly neglected ingredient. Their argument goes that traditionally children were given their set of assumptions by the family and the wider community of adults of which the wider community was a part. As the family has become denuded of adults through a narrowing of the extended family and the neighbourhood has lost its character as an independent community, the institution which formally socialised our children are crumbling.

Clark and Ramsey proceed to talk about the benefits of the 'small diversified village' in promoting social capital. What we have in essence in many of our rural communities is the basic model being proposed by urban planning groups.

The emphasis in the literature on educational administration, according to Dr Charles Burford, has moved from a focus on curriculum offerings to the essential and motivating influence of the informal curriculum. Burford even went as far as to suggest that an equally important criterion for parents choosing a new school for their children should be the cohesiveness and energy of parent bodies supporting the school.

The importance of the 'informal' curriculum is further highlighted by some as yet unpublished research by Brother Marcellin Flynn on 50 secondary Catholic schools in NSW and the ACT. In that research Marcellin has found a link between the informal curriculum and performance. The research outcomes, particularly the student responses, focused very much on the quality of relationships.

My thesis is that given the natural closeness of rural communities many aspects of smaller rural schools mirror (or have the potential to do so) the ideal in this respect thus impacting on motivation and educational performance as well as quality of life.

Many systems throughout the country are in the process of school evaluation, appraisal or renewal exercises. It will be interesting to study the differential responses of the parent bodies and the wider communities to invitations for participation.

THE CRISIS OF THE ECONOMY

The Increased Potential for School Business Enterprises

The Finn Committee in July 1991 argued for a necessary convergence of general and vocational education. Despite pleas by Anne Morrow (a member of the Finn Committee) for an appreciation of perspectives on this issue and assertions by Cherry Collins that general and vocational in this context is a false dichotomy, there is pressure on schools to relate more of what happens in schools to national economic needs.

The executive summary of the report says quite uncompromisingly:

> "This review implies that in order to serve their clients needs schools will need to change. Schools will need to become more concerned with issues of employability and the provision of broad vocational education".
>
> (ix)

The ACSA (Australian Curriculum Studies Association) is conducting some valuable research on school/industry links and preliminary findings indicate some quite fascinating rural examples of well established innovative linkages.

One of the purposes of the research was to identify, encourage and support the best rural enterprise or school/industry practices.

The research involved the strategies of survey and potential case studies of exemplary practice. The survey indicated the following range of activities with industry links and which are uniquely rural in orientation:

- cultivation
- tree propagation
- animal husbandry
- mussel farming
- aquaculture
- harvesting of tee tree and separation of oils.

To some degree, and quite inadvertently, this development focuses on a major concern of Helen Sungaila who undertook an exceptionally thorough but unpublished study of the Instructional Needs of Country Children in 1979. Helen's major finding was that country students lacked a natural curiosity and the teaching as well as the curriculum needed to be more responsive to the interests and experiences of these children. Helen concluded that 'Aboriginal children learn best by doing'; 'poorer white country children have an urgent need to have their curiosity aroused by a classroom environment .. rich with novel, strange, incongruous, mysterious, concrete observable stimuli'; 'All country children well endowed or deprived, white or black need the awareness of, attention of and corroboration with supportive adults if they are to be curious'.

A number of significant Finn recommendations concerning vocational stimuli sit comfortably with the existing rural platform and potentially feed well the needs of country students. As Clark and Ramsey observed: "Integrated communities create the equivalent of a small diversified village where children can observe work and trades close at hand and even play a role in them". This surely is a plus when we examine the potential for creativity in crisis.

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